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From classroom to career: A new approach to Work-Integrated Learning in communication studies

Abstract

Purpose

This study aimed to realign the Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) curriculum at an Australian university with communication industry standards and student career goals. It proposes practical suggestions for a third-year communications studies WIL course that will effectively prepare students for professional success by integrating insights from industry and students.

Design/methodology/approach

It analyses free-text feedback from student experience of course surveys (n=20), semi-structured interviews with industry partners (n=8), and conducts a detailed review of existing WIL course materials. Drawing from the Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM) as a theoretical framework, the study explores the findings for links to capital.

Findings

The findings emphasise the need for WIL programs to better align with the industry's evolving demands, incorporating practical, real-world experiences to enhance skill development and workforce readiness. Feedback from students and industry partners aligns with the ECGM framework and underscores the importance of integrating coaching and mentoring into the curriculum to support employability. Based on these insights, an integrated set of practical suggestions is presented.

Originality

This project fills a gap in WIL scholarship by focussing on a communication studies environment, ensuring it aligns with industry demands while prioritising student engagement. By ethically involving industry partners and integrating student feedback, the suggestions set out a curriculum that is both current and resonates with learner experience and career readiness. It bridges the academic-professional divide, preparing students as confident, skilled professionals ready to enter the workforce.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving field of communication, the gap between academic training and industry readiness presents a significant challenge for higher education institutions. Employability has been a topic of interest for some time (Knight and Yorke, 2006). The contemporary labour market requires students to excel academically and engage in extracurricular activities to gain employability experience (Donald *et al.*, 2018; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). The advantages that higher education once carried are reduced due to declining university enrolments and financial burdens in the current cost of living crisis. Therefore, courses must provide students with a broader skillset crucial for successfully transitioning into a global market. The ACEN (2023) report indicated a proportionally larger number of communication students participated in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) across Australia, yet student perceptions of employability are declining across the four indicators surveyed. It is imperative for students to balance academic success with the development of transferable skills. This dual focus boosts employability and prepares students for the global job market, ensuring a seamless transition from education to employment. This article proposes strategic enhancements of the WIL framework within communication studies at an Australian university to bridge this gap.

Although beneficial in building student experience, current methods of embedding WIL in universities are limited to developing basic knowledge without significantly improving the students' professional experience (Lantu *et al.*, 2022). This lack of professional development is related to the calibre and type of tasks that students perform during the placements, often limited to clerical work (Lantu *et al.*, 2022). This highlights the need for continuous curriculum revision and practical skill integration in all WIL frameworks to ensure students can complete high-level tasks. Employability Capital, referring to the resources individuals possess or can develop to enhance their employability, is integral to this initiative (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). A coaching and mentoring methodology is central to this approach (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Andrianoff, 2017; Jones and Smith, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023), shifting from traditional didactic teaching to an experiential and mentorship-driven model. An educator's role exceeds instruction, educators act as coaches, guiding students to realise their full potential (Hutson *et al.*, 2022; Amoroso and Burke, 2018; Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). This aligns

with contemporary educational trends towards experiential learning, emphasising career readiness, practical application, and real-world experience (Manville *et al.*, 2022; Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017; Lantu *et al.*, 2022).

Literature Review and Development of Research Questions

The evolving professional communication industry

In the past 20 years, a significant shift occurred in the communication industry. The global expansion of online technology has revolutionised the industry, necessitating a more robust and comprehensive experience for students studying professional communication to navigate these changes and be career-ready. The industry is one of the fastest growing, with significant changes in technology advancements (Grantham and Pearson, 2021). The digital era has reshaped traditional media, and the internet's rapid evolution is altering how organisations engage with their audience (Lipschultz, 2020; Grantham and Pearson, 2021). The transformation has led to instant gratification expectations, multitasking, increased connectivity, blurring work-life boundaries, dependence on technology, and reduced attention spans. While these changes enhance the industry's attractiveness, they also demand more experienced junior staff, leaving no room for errors. The instantaneous nature of online communication has created a primarily unmoderated two-way communication approach, allowing the audience to control messages (Grantham and Pearson, 2021).

The role of WIL in employability preparation

Although proficient in offering students foundational learning, traditional educational settings predominantly provide theoretical knowledge (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; ACEN, 2015). It has become essential for students to be equipped with practical skills and attributes sought by employers (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Dean and Rook, 2023; Lim *et al.*, 2023; Hughes *et al.*, 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2019). Australian universities focus on enhancing employability through practical experiences such as internships and industry placements, integrating WIL in their curricula to provide students with real-world experience and skills (Saito and Pham, 2021). WIL programs are critical for higher education students learning experience (Wang *et al.*, 2023, ACEN, 2015). A 2015 report shows that students acknowledge WIL programs'

potential to build upon and apply theoretical learning in real-world settings, enhancing their competitiveness in the job market (ACEN, 2015). However, a 2019 report reveals that only 37% of students participated in WIL activities (Universities Australia, 2019). The recent ACEN (2023) report indicates a decline in students' perceptions of their employability. Despite the growing emphasis on WIL, many students will graduate with limited practical experience, highlighting the divide between academic theory and the tangible skills employers require (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). In response, many universities have made enhancing student employability a core value, recognising the necessity of providing students with 'real-world' experience.

While in-class simulations enhance career readiness, placements develop relationships between students, organisations and the broader community. These placements empower students to identify opportunities and leverage their intuition, potentially leading to the creation of new ventures (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023) and the development of human capital for both the tertiary institution and the partner organisation (Hughes *et al.*, 2023; Lantu *et al.*, 2023). Petruzzello *et al.* (2024) suggest that students who participate in WIL programs exhibit higher levels of employability due to the practical experience and professional networks they gain. Saito and Pham (2021) track the career trajectories of WIL graduates, revealing sustained improvements in employability metrics such as job acquisition, career progression, and job satisfaction. These studies highlight the tangible benefits of integrating hands-on learning within academic programs, highlighting WIL's role in fostering career-ready graduates.

Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM) as a theoretical framework

The ECGM framework aims to operationalise forms of capital to provide a structured approach to enhancing employability. By integrating nine key types of capital, the model offers a holistic view of what constitutes employability. The included capitals are: (i) Social Capital, (ii) Cultural Capital, (iii) Psychological Capital, (iv) Personal Identity Capital, (v) Health Capital, (vi) Scholastic Capital, (vii) Market-Value Capital, (viii) Career Identity Capital, (ix) Economic Capital (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

These capitals are psycho-social resources originating from one's sociocultural environment, bolstering control, confidence, and motivation during transitional tasks (Tomlinson, 2017). This approach is critical in today's job market, where a combination of skills, networks, cultural fit, and psychological resilience are essential for career success. According to the ECGM (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), these capitals do not function in isolation; instead, they interact and enhance one another, facilitating the acquisition or modification of additional capitals needed to achieve favourable transition outcomes, such as successful employment placements (Petruzzello *et al.*, 2024). The ECGM provides a valuable tool for assessing and developing employability among students and job seekers. By focusing on the different forms of capital, practitioners can design more targeted interventions to enhance employability.

Coaching and mentoring to build capital

Over the past decade, the education sector has recognised the need to incorporate coaching and mentoring techniques, transforming traditional education methods (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Jones and Smith, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Conventional educational settings often adopt a directive approach where educators provide instructions or advice on a supervisory basis. Establishing mentorship relations with industry helps students prepare for real-world professional challenges by building capital (Donald and Manville, 2023; Hutson *et al.*, 2022; Jackson *et al.*, 2019). It is important to differentiate mentorship from supervision. Mentorship entails reflective discussions, knowledge and experience exchange, and emotional and practical support while being voluntary, contrasting the obligatory nature of supervision (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Unlike traditional supervisors, mentors guide mentees toward broader achievements, such as career advancement or long-term goals, rather than focusing solely on task completion (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). Mentoring provides crucial support, enhancing their workplace knowledge, professional behaviour, and organisational acclimatisation, key aspects of WIL. Studies show this dual support facilitates personal development, career clarity, and practical application of theoretical knowledge, significantly contributing to employability and professional identity formation (Smith-Ruig, 2014). Mentorship and coaching complement each other and effectively support career readiness (Jones, 2015; Andreanoff, 2017). Incorporating these into WIL programs could nurture professional

development and workplace readiness by building capital (Donald and Manville, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023; Drewery *et al.*, 2023; Dean and Rook, 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2019). Through these practices, students might benefit from industry expert guidance, enhancing their learning experiences.

Research questions

The three research questions were identified by drawing from the literature presented above.

RQ1 – What attributes make a graduate employable in the communication industry?

RQ2 – How can a WIL-based university course allow students to establish employable attributes?

RQ3 – What are the perceived gaps between the current WIL program structures and the evolving demands of the professional communication industry?

Methodology

The qualitative research methodology involves a systematic review centred around three distinct data sets. Ethics approval was granted for this research - GU Ref No: 2024/042. This methodological approach is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the gap between current academic offerings and industry needs, guiding the refinement of the WIL course framework to better prepare students for their professional futures.

Student surveys

The project began by analysing anonymised responses from previous Student Experience of Courses (SEC) surveys. These surveys are entirely anonymous; students complete the survey online, and no data about the respondent is collected to encourage truthful responses with no consequences. We only analysed free-text feedback from students who completed the course during 2022 and 2023 (n=20). The survey asked two standard questions to prompt students to provide insights on their experience in this course. They were:

- What did you find particularly good about this course?

- How could this course be improved?

The data was initially analysed using Leximancer, a software program that searches text and generates concepts and the relationship between concepts, grouping them into themes (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). It searches within text files for semantic patterns in an unbiased way. Identified themes were manually coded in NVivo to triangulate the automatic Leximancer analysis. Each response could be aligned to more than one theme. The use of SEC data adheres to the SEC policy, ensuring ethical use of student feedback for educational improvement.

Industry partner semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight industry partners to gain insights into the expectations and requirements for interns and recent graduates in the communication industry. The partners worked at the management level in the communication section of large to small organisations and teams. In these roles they supervised or recruited interns. Three were male, and five were female, and they ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-40s. They participated in an approximately 30-minute online video discussion led by the Chief Investigator. The discussion framework began with predefined questions focusing on the tasks expected of interns or recent graduates, their competency levels, and the requisite skills for optimal performance. The semi-structured nature of these interviews permitted spontaneous exploration of emergent topics, enriching the data collected. The discussions aimed to clarify industry standards and expectations, facilitating a comparative analysis with the existing WIL curriculum. Transcriptions were thematically analysed for consistency in themes across the interviews. Like the survey data, the initial analysis used Leximancer (Smith and Humphreys, 2006) to search for semantic patterns in an unbiased way. Identified themes were again manually coded in NVivo to triangulate the automatic approach taken through Leximancer. Each response could correspond to multiple themes. The objective was to allow theory to evolve through reflective analysis and data review.

Analysis of existing course material

The third dataset analysed the current third-year industry-focused WIL course. We examined the course objectives, learning outcomes against curriculum, assignment

guidelines, and internship placement processes to measure student success. This analysis was performed using the three key themes that emerged from the student survey data and the three key themes that emerged from the industry interviews, which were used as a benchmark for industry standards and expectations relevant to the professional communication fields.

Findings

Insights from student survey analysis

Analysis of the student survey revealed three key themes, underscoring the need for a more practical, relevant, and well-structured course framework (Table I). These themes address student concerns and suggestions, including the value of internship experiences to the necessity for improved course organisation and support systems.

Table I – Student survey themes

Value of internship experience

Student feedback underscores internships' significant role in complementing academic learning with essential practical exposure. These experiences translate theoretical knowledge into real-world skills, shaping students' professional trajectories. Internships contribute to different forms of capital in the ECGM. For instance, internships can enhance Social Capital by building professional networks, Cultural Capital by exposing students to workplace norms, Market-Value Capital from the experience gained, and Career Identity Capital by developing a professional identity (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). One student viewed the internship as a foundational step into the professional realm:

"This course represents the first step for students into their respective careers that they have been learning about over the duration of this degree."

Through these narratives, we can surmise that internships serve as a conduit for industry insight, personal growth, and the honing of job-specific abilities, underscoring the impact of these experiences on students' employability (Saito and Pham, 2021; Petruzziello *et al.*, 2024).

However, respondents noted the need for better course organisation, particularly in facilitating internships and clarifying internships and assessment criteria. Early initiation of the internship placement process, potentially during orientation, was suggested to improve course coherence and student preparedness, ensuring a student-led experience.

Assessment structure and relevance

Student feedback highlights the need for assessments in courses that combine academic instruction with practical internships to reflect and reinforce learning objectives. Some students question their alignment with practical experiences, advocating for a more integrated approach. One respondent suggested assessments should accurately reflect their multifaceted learning experiences. Concerns were raised about the relevance and volume of assessments, with students advocating for reduced written assignments in favour of more practical, industry-aligned tasks. This feedback calls for re-evaluating assessment strategies to ensure they are meaningful and aligned with professional standards, highlighting that practical, industry-aligned tasks can build Market-Value Capital and Scholastic Capital by aligning assessments with real-world applications (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Support – financial and time considerations

The narratives shared by students reveal a pressing need for more robust support systems to navigate the financial and temporal demands of internships within academic programs. The dual challenge of unpaid internships and the substantial time investment they require is a recurring theme. One student expressed frustration over the financial and time burdens, suggesting:

"I believe students should be compensated with various discounts to grocery stores due to the fact that they have to take a considerable financial loss due to this internship..."

This highlights the broader economic implications of unpaid internships and the repercussions for students already balancing multiple commitments, linking to Economic Capital or lack thereof (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Another respondent lamented the excessive workload:

"...also there are too many written assignments (4) on top of over 75 hours of unpaid work, plus travel time."

These comments highlight the need for effective support mechanisms embedded in the course and degree structure to mitigate financial strain and time management complexities. Financial and logistical support can contribute to Health and Psychological Capital by reducing stress and enabling students to focus on professional development (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

In summary, the findings from the student surveys underscore an apparent demand for a course structure that is more aligned with industry standards, offers greater support and flexibility, and considers the student's financial and mental well-being. These insights are instrumental in guiding future course developments to better meet students' needs and expectations, preparing them more effectively for their professional futures.

Insights from the professional interviews

Interviews with the industry partners found three key themes about what makes an employable graduate (Table II).

Table II – Professional interview themes

Professionalism

Professionalism includes a few specific topics that were grouped under one theme. All interviewees discussed an aspect of professionalism as part of their interview and reported an overwhelming issue with graduates regarding a lack of confidence and proactivity. Conversely, when they exhibit confidence, it is often displayed as an over-assertion of their ideas, even those of others in a more senior position.

"Younger staff tend to not take 'no' as an answer, and will challenge decisions."

Despite this, some junior staff will not engage in the required practices to fully immerse in the industry:

"Some junior staff don't watch the news despite working all day to get coverage on the news."

The significance of context in professional communication cannot be overstated (Donald *et al.*, 2024b). Findings reveal a crucial learning gap: students must adapt their communication to align with the specific context of their organisation. This includes understanding the unique culture, values, operational norms, and language of the organisation or industry. It involves grasping workplace intricacies, the distribution platforms used, audience, and the political implications of communications.

Additionally, this theme covers legal and contractual issues, such as non-disclosure agreements. Students must be very aware of privacy requirements, particularly when working in large organisations.

“Yes, students on internship will be exposed to some confidential information, and they will need to be vetted through our processes before being able to attend on-site.”

While understanding media laws is an essential skill taught in communication studies, students must be reminded that what they see and hear in a workplace is not for public broadcasting.

These findings highlight how developing professionalism through internships contributes to Psychological Capital and Personal Identity Capital (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Experience is more than a degree.

Five of the eight participants indicated the need for graduates with some level of experience. The required experience varied by organisation, with some needing specific industry insights for junior staff to succeed. Practical experience significantly contributes to Career Identity Capital and Market-Value Capital (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Responses suggested that experience is crucial for developing strong skills essential for career readiness in the professional communication industry, as highlighted by this participant:

“A lack of degree doesn’t omit someone from being successful in job applications, particularly if they can write with no errors.”

A need for a broad skillset

The industry has changed, and junior staff must write for multiple channels, repurposing information for various outputs like social media, video, audio, storytelling, and media

releases. They must also possess technical skills in photography, videography, and editing tools.

Overall, the industry interviews highlighted the need for graduates to be adaptable, technically skilled, and professionally mature, with a deep understanding of the industry context and the ability to apply their skills effectively. A broad skillset contributes to multiple forms of capital, such as Technical Skills (Market-Value Capital) and Adaptability (Psychological Capital) (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Analysis of existing curriculum

The curriculum analysis was conducted comprehensively considering findings from the initial two data sets, searching for areas where the course fell short of meeting industry requirements or student expectations. It is split into three areas: the internship component, assessments, and industry partners.

Internship Component

The analysis revealed a structured but delayed placement process. Despite early initiation in the 12-week delivery, students indicated that securing placements often takes too long, hindering their ability to complete the hours efficiently. This delay is problematic, especially in the current economy, as students struggle to balance internships with maintaining income.

Additionally, the communication industry allows for a wide range of positions in which students can aspire to be placed. Arranging individual placements for each student is unsustainable in large cohorts, diminishing the importance of professional maturity and students' ownership, as outlined in the industry interviews. Further, the feedback mechanism is limited to a one-time evaluation by the internship supervisor, lacking a continuous feedback loop essential for ongoing learning and skill enhancement.

Assessment Evaluation

The course's assessment encompasses five principal components. A significant finding is the limited capacity of theoretical assessments to furnish students with the hands-on skills essential for career readiness. This finding aligns with the industry expectations of students

being industry-ready. Delayed placement commencement has further repercussions, causing deferrals in submitting assessments and, in some cases, delaying graduation for final-year students. It is apparent that a curriculum overhaul is necessary, emphasising practical, industry-aligned tasks to bolster students' readiness for the workforce, resonating with the university's aspirations towards fostering career readiness among its graduates.

Industry Partner List

Upon review, the existing list of potential internship partners needed to be updated. It constricts students' choices and inadvertently encourages reliance on the provided list rather than promoting an active and individualised pursuit of opportunities. To rectify this, the list must be refreshed and restructured to act as a guiding tool rather than a definitive directory, motivating students to seek internship opportunities that more closely mirror their unique interests and professional ambitions.

Discussion

When juxtaposed with the literature, this research's findings provide a nuanced understanding of the gap between the current educational practices in the studied WIL program and the evolving needs of the professional communication industry.

Response to research questions

In response to RQ1 – What attributes make a graduate employable in the communication industry? – The seismic shifts in the communication industry necessitate re-evaluating the attributes that define an employable graduate. The literature highlights the industry's rapid evolution, driven by technological advancements and changing communication paradigms (Grantham and Pearson, 2021). This evolution demands graduates with theoretical knowledge and practical skills such as digital literacy, adaptability, and professional maturity. The industry's evolution demands graduates who excel in traditional communication and modern technology, engaging diverse global audiences through digital platforms (Lipschultz, 2020; Grantham and Pearson, 2021). Technological advancements relate to the need for digital literacy and adaptability, highlighted in student surveys and industry interviews. The findings from the industry partner interviews further underscore

the importance of these attributes, with industry partners emphasising the need for professionalism, real-world experience, and a diverse skill set in graduates. This aligns with the literature suggesting that employability in the contemporary landscape is not solely determined by academic credentials but also by real-world experiences and the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). This finding is supported by other studies indicating that students who engage in WIL activities develop critical human skills, which are highly valued in the workplace (Donald *et al.*, 2018; Clarke, 2018). Gaining practical experience and a broad skillset is crucial for building Career Identity Capital, Psychological Capital and Market-Value Capital, as it allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings and develop industry-specific skills (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Graduates must be professionally mature, confident in expected tasks, possess good writing skills, and adapt to the changing industry. Coaching throughout tertiary education enhances these attributes by helping mentees reach their goals bi-directionally (Andreanoff, 2017). This emphasis on professionalism aligns with developing Psychological Capital and Personal Identity Capital, as students learn to navigate professional environments and build their professional identities (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Addressing RQ2 – How can a WIL-based university course allow students to establish employable attributes? – WIL equips students with the skills and experiences needed for professional success. The literature advocates for WIL to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, offering industry exposure and the opportunity to develop employable skills (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; ACEN, 2015). However, the student surveys point to the need for WIL programs to address logistical and financial challenges faced during internships.

For WIL to be effective, it must align with industry standards and student needs, providing flexible, supportive, and engaging learning experiences that prepare students for professional realities. Structured mentorship and real-world industry engagement are key, offering significant career-related and psycho-social benefits such as increased confidence and improved communication skills (Smith-Ruig, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2023; Lim *et al.*, 2023; Andreanoff, 2017). By pairing students with industry professionals, WIL programs facilitate the practical application of classroom knowledge in real-world scenarios, bridging the gap between academic theory and professional practice (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017).

Incorporating coaching and mentoring within the curriculum ensures personalised guidance and continuous feedback, allowing students to reflect on their progress and adjust their learning strategies within their chosen industry (Donald *et al.*, 2024b; Wang *et al.*, 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, WIL courses should align closely with industry practices by facilitating work-oriented projects and integrating hands-on tasks into the curriculum (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). This ensures that students develop practical skills and professional behaviours valued by employers. Projects involving job application writing, project management, and expressions of interest can help students take control of their professional development and better prepare for the workforce. Updating course content to include emerging technologies and practices relevant to the communication industry further enhances employability by ensuring students are equipped with the latest skills required in the job market.

Responding to RQ3 – What are the perceived gaps between the current WIL program structures and the evolving demands of the professional communication industry? – The perceived gaps between current WIL program structures and the evolving demands of the professional communication industry highlight several areas for improvement. One significant gap is the limited capacity of theoretical assessments to furnish students with the hands-on skills essential for career readiness (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017). Revising assessment strategies to focus more on practical skills and less on reflective assignments can better align educational outcomes with industry expectations (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; ACEN, 2015). Practical tasks such as job application writing, and expressions of interest should be emphasised to ensure students are career-ready upon graduation (Manville *et al.*, 2022).

Another critical gap is the delay in securing internship placements, which hinders students' ability to complete required hours efficiently. Addressing this issue requires early initiation of the placement process and enhancing feedback mechanisms to provide a continuous and iterative learning experience. Current WIL programs also lack adequate support systems, failing to meet industry demands and student needs. This disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical skills is particularly concerning. Delayed placements and insufficient feedback hinder students' ability to gain timely and relevant industry experience

and improve their professional skills (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; ACEN, 2015). Incorporating the ECGM can address these issues by focusing on developing various forms of capital, which are critical for career success (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Updating WIL frameworks to focus on practical, industry-relevant tasks, streamlining internship placements, and enhancing support systems to address financial and logistical challenges can bridge these gaps (Lim *et al.*, 2023). Financial support for unpaid positions can help mitigate these challenges and better prepare students for the professional world.

The crucial role of coaching and mentoring in WIL frameworks

While the findings suggest improvements that fulfil all nine capitals outlined in the ECGM (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), integrating coaching and mentoring within WIL frameworks and the broader educational curriculum is paramount for several reasons. These practices bridge the theoretical and practical realms, offering students a direct pathway to apply classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios, especially in rapidly evolving fields like communication (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Andreanoff, 2017). This alignment enhances the learning experience and ensures the relevance of education to professional requirements.

Coaching and mentoring provide personalised support, tailoring education to individual student needs and fostering an inclusive learning environment (Smith-Ruig, 2014; Lim *et al.*, 2023). These practices help develop a robust professional identity, equipping students with the confidence and ethical grounding necessary for industry roles. They bolster employability by injecting essential workplace skills and professional behaviours, making students more competitive. Skills nurtured through coaching and mentoring, such as adaptability, resilience, and critical thinking, are vital for professional success and fostering lifelong learning (Cole and Coulson, 2022; Donald and Manville, 2023; Andreanoff, 2017).

Mentoring enhances Social Capital by expanding professional networks and Cultural Capital by aligning student behaviours with industry expectations (Smith-Ruig, 2014). Coaching builds Psychological Capital by boosting confidence and resilience. Mentors help clarify career goals, enhancing Personal Identity Capital (Andreanoff, 2017). Traditional education builds Scholastic Capital, but mentoring helps apply this knowledge practically, enhancing Market-Value Capital (Donald *et al.*, 2024a). Mentors support Career Identity Capital by

guiding career objectives and Health Capital by balancing academic and professional demands (Smith-Ruig, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Integrating coaching and mentoring in WIL programs enhances Employability Capital and fosters lifelong learning and adaptability (Cole and Coulson, 2022). These practices bolster employability and ensure sustained professional growth in the dynamic communication industry (Donald *et al.*, 2024a; Smith-Ruig, 2014).

Practical implications - integrated set of practical WIL suggestions

As a result of the above, we present the following suggestions to create a dynamic, relevant, and supportive WIL program that meets industry needs and addresses student concerns and aspirations. These suggestions are rooted in the understanding that traditional educational settings predominantly provide theoretical knowledge, which must be complemented with practical skills and experiences to meet employer expectations and enhance student employability (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; ACEN, 2015).

Deepened industry engagement

Industry partnerships must be strengthened to ensure diverse internship opportunities. Facilitating regular dialogues between academic staff and industry partners aligns the curriculum with current industry standards and expectations providing students with real-world experience (Saito and Pham, 2021). By regularly reviewing and updating the list of potential internship partners, institutions can ensure relevance and currency, encouraging students to proactively seek internships that align with their career aspirations. Industry mentors play a crucial role in providing hands-on experience and insights, bridging theoretical learning and practical application (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Dean and Rook, 2023). This aligns with the need for continuous and iterative feedback mechanisms to enhance learning and skill development, as suggested by industry experts (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

Real-World Alignment and Learning

WIL experiences, such as placements and projects, must be closely aligned with real-world industry practices. Facilitate work-oriented projects where industry and community partners contextualise education, making a tangible difference to student skills and

capacity. Integrating hands-on, industry-specific tasks into the curriculum, such as job application writing, project management, and expressions of interest, is essential for bridging the gap between academic theory and the tangible skills employers require (Hughes *et al.*, 2023). Updating course content to include emerging technologies and practices relevant to the communication industry and offering personalised learning options, such as exemptions or reduced hours for students already working in the industry, can further enhance employability (Lantu *et al.*, 2023).

Iterative feedback with coaching and mentorship

The curriculum should formally incorporate coaching and mentoring components, with industry professionals and academic staff acting as mentors to guide students through their WIL experiences. Structured mentorship programs, where students are paired with mentors based on their professional interests and career aspirations, facilitate personalised guidance and support (Smith-Ruig, 2014; Andreanoff, 2017). Implementing a continuous feedback loop during internships for iterative learning and improvement allows students to reflect on their progress, receive constructive feedback, and adjust their learning strategies in real-time (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Drewery *et al.*, 2023). This approach ensures that students are equipped with practical skills and attributes that employers see as desirable for the future workforce (Dean and Rook, 2023; Lim *et al.*, 2023).

Enhanced support infrastructure

The support infrastructure should address technical and academic needs and provide comprehensive well-being resources. Strengthening links to existing support mechanisms within the institution and addressing financial concerns by exploring options for compensated internships or providing financial support for unpaid positions are critical (Hutson *et al.*, 2022; Amoroso and Burke, 2018). This holistic support ensures that students can fully engage in their practical experiences without undue financial strain, thus enhancing their employability (Wang *et al.*, 2023; ACEN, 2015).

Assessment Revision

Revise assessment items to focus more on practical skills and less on reflective assignments. Aligning these assessments with industry expectations and including tasks that enhance career readiness, such as job application writing and expressions of interest, are essential

(Donald *et al.*, 2024a; Jackson *et al.*, 2013). This approach helps students take control over the communication related to the placement initiation, ensuring they are better prepared for the workforce (Hutson *et al.*, 2022; Manville *et al.*, 2022).

By implementing these enhancements, the WIL framework will be better aligned with the findings of the research and the theoretical insights discussed (Donald *et al.*, 2024a; Lim *et al.*, 2023). This will create a more dynamic, relevant, and supportive program that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities of the professional world (Jackson *et al.*, 2013). These suggestions aim to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical skills, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of WIL in fostering career-ready graduates (Petruzzello *et al.*, 2024; Saito and Pham, 2021).

Limitations and future research

We recognise several limitations of the study. First, the analysis is based on a limited data set from students undertaking communication studies at one Australian university, so it is insufficient to generalise the findings to other disciplines. Secondly, the industry partners interviewed were a small group of committed industry partners prioritising quality over quantity. Despite being limited, the study provides a solid foundation for future iterations of WIL delivery in communication studies which can be used as the basis for extended research. The proposed suggestions could be applied to higher education settings across multiple disciplines emphasising the value of mentoring and coaching (Arnesson and Albinsson, 2017; Andreatoff, 2017; Jones and Smith, 2022). However, a longitudinal study could enhance the specific approach to implementing the framework within institutions. In addition, future research might analyse how attributes developed through the proposed WIL framework improve Human Capital creation (Hughes *et al.*, 2023) and the employability outcomes of the students (Hutson *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the imperative need for enhancements across the internship component, assessment strategies, and selection of industry partners within the WIL program. Key recommendations include streamlining the internship placement process, revising assessments to emphasise practical skills, and updating industry partners to reflect

current standards. These modifications are essential for enriching the educational experience, boosting student employability, and maximising the WIL program's efficacy (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Jones and Smith, 2022).

The findings underscore WIL's role in advancing technical skills and bolstering students' confidence and workforce readiness. A significant challenge is transitioning from academic theory to practical application, affecting students' ability to secure employment post-internship or upon graduation (Hutson *et al.*, 2022; Amoroso and Burke, 2018). Addressing these gaps aligns student and industry expectations and fosters graduates' comprehensive development. A mentorship-driven approach is advocated, transforming educators and industry supervisors into guides for real-world application (Andreanoff, 2017). This model encourages proactive career development, enhancing responsibility and direction. Practical experiences are crucial in shaping career paths and skill sets, emphasising the university's role in preparing students for this transition (Drewery *et al.*, 2023). Challenges such as adapting to professional environments and mastering new technologies are balanced by the rewards of impactful work and constructive feedback (Manville *et al.*, 2022).

Ultimately, the suggested approach aims to rejuvenate the WIL curriculum, instilling ownership and confidence in students and preparing them for the evolving communication industry demands. This study contributes valuable insights into the efficacy of WIL in equipping students for successful careers, underscoring the necessity of experiential learning within higher education curricula (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Saito and Pham, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2024a; PetruzzIELLO *et al.*, 2024). Implementing these recommendations will ensure the WIL program enhances educational enrichment and professional preparation, producing knowledgeable, adaptable, confident graduates ready to contribute meaningfully to their respective fields.

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